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"THE EXPERIMENT OF A FREE CHURCH; ITS DIFFICULTIES AND ADVANTAGES."

(1876)

BY JAMES FREEMAN CLARKE, OF JAMAICA PLAIN, MASS.

I am to read a paper to you on "The Experiment of a Free Church; its Difficulties and Advantages." By a Free Church is meant a church in which the pews and seats are not sold or rented, but are open to all comers.

When I speak of a church thus open to all the people of a place, as being "an experiment," I mean, of course, an experiment at the present time, in the United States, and among Unitarians and other Protestants, especially in cities. An open church, with all its seats free, is an experiment with us just now; but as regards the Christian Church universal, it has been the method of the great majority in all times. The Roman Catholic Churches all over Europe are open to all comers. All that is conceded to rich and fashionable people, even in places like Paris, and churches like the Madelaine, is the privilege of hiring a cane-bottom chair from an old woman, for a couple of pennies, and that only when it is to be immediately used. All over England the parish church belongs to all who live in the parish, and the private pews in them are the exception. The poorest people and the richest and noblest meet together there, in the same parish church. In the early days of New England it was the same. All our Congregational Churches were open to the people of the place, whether poor or rich, and seats were assigned to those who wanted them, without pay, since the expenses of the church were then paid by a general tax on the town. We might therefore say that the experiment we are now trying is that of churches in which the seats are sold or rented to private parties, and which are not freely open to the public. It is not the free-seat system which is on trial, but the pew system. But since the pew system has become so universal among us, especially in cities and large towns, and has been partially adopted even by the Roman Catholics in this country, I call the system which offers all the seats in a church to all comers an experiment.

The experiment to which I now refer is that of the Church of the

Disciples, in Boston. This church was founded in 1841, and the principle then adopted was that "the expenses of the church should be defrayed by a voluntary subscription, and pews should not be sold, rented, or taxed." This principle, then adopted, has been adhered to during thirty-five years. During all that time no seat has ever been sold, rented, or taxed. During all that time the poorest members of the society have had as good a right to the best places in the church as the richest. During all that time strangers in the city, outsiders, unchurched persons, or members of other churches, have been welcomed to come in and sit down where they liked, as they would do in a lecture room or public meeting. The inconveniences of this plan we have found few and small in comparison with its advantages, and there has never been any serious attempt made to change it.

I ought to say that at one time, for a year or two, twenty-five years ago, we adopted the plan of assigning permanent seats to families and those who wished for them. About half the church was thus assigned, on the two sides; while the centre of the church, from the pulpit to the door, was left free. No charge was made for these assigned seats,—any one who chose could have them. But after trying this plan for a year or two, it was dropt, and for some twenty years the whole church has been open to all persons, to sit where they would. I ought, however, also to say that a good many of the permanent worshippers and members of the society get into the habit of sitting in or near the same place from Sunday to Sunday. This arises from some natural propensity which also leads people to select the same places from week to week at lectures or concerts. We feel more at ease in sitting where we are accustomed to sit. Members of our society respect each other's wishes in this regard, and avoid taking the seats usually occupied by others. Our habitual worshippers, therefore, have practically the advantage, whatever it may be, of sitting commonly in the same place. Only they are aware that they have no *right* to this particular seat; and therefore if, on coming to church, they find it occupied by a stranger, they do not look at him angrily or inquiringly, as an intruder, but quietly sit down in the nearest place which is vacant. They know full well that they only retain their usual seat through courtesy; just as they might have a particular chair left for them in a parlor, and that they have no claim to it. Let me add that when an habitual seat is thus conceded, not as a

right, but as a courtesy, it cultivates kindly feelings on both sides, blessing him who gives it and him who takes it.

And now what are the advantages of this method over that of selling or letting the seats?

If it is still the duty of Christians to-day, as it was at first, to preach the gospel to every creature, then every creature ought to be invited in where the gospel is preached. If it is important, for example, that all the people in Boston shall have religious instruction, the doors should be open to all to come. We provide free schools, because we think all children ought to be taught to read and write. If we were to abolish the free school system, and leave only the private schools, where those go who are able and willing to pay for instruction, we should put our system of secular education exactly where our system of religious education now stands. But if Christian truth is as important as earthly knowledge, ought it not to be dispensed as freely and as universally?

We have laws which set apart Sunday from secular pursuits, and forbid common labors, in order that a part of human life shall be given to the public worship of God. But how can that be called *public worship* to which only those are invited who can buy or hire seats? Can we speak of *public worship*, when we mean the worship of a limited number of pew-holders and their families, where no others are expected to come?

On the pew system, those who collect every Sunday to hear the gospel are those who already care for it sufficiently to be willing to buy pews or hire seats. But the large body of the community, who are not sufficiently interested in God and Christ and Christian salvation to go to this expense and trouble, remain untaught. Those who are whole have the physician and not the sick. The righteous are called to repentance, and the sinners are left to themselves. In this way the plan of Jesus seems to be exactly reversed.

This difficulty is sometimes temporarily relieved by a revival season, when the churches are open to all inquirers; or by the coming of some Moody and Sankey. But these spasmodic efforts to reach the unchurched are not very successful. It is chiefly the church-goers who attend the revival meetings. Wesley and Whitefield met the case by going where the outsiders were to be found, and preaching on the commons, and in the streets, and in the markets. But this also is necessarily a temporary expedient. Churches are naturally the relig-

ious homes of the people,—they should be free to all the people,—made attractive and inviting by beautiful architecture, fine music, good paintings, interesting teaching. Not only on Sunday, but through the week, the doors should stand open, and everything be done to make the poor, the lonely, the stranger, the distressed, the despairing, feel that here they can go in and find rest.

Years ago, Dr. Tuckerman, seeing how our present administration of religion left great numbers neglected, organized the "Ministry at Large," the object of which was to seek and save the lost. All honor to him for this truly Christian enterprise, and all thanks and sympathy for those who have followed in his footsteps. And yet there is this objection: that it makes a separate class of those who worship in these chapels. This is sometimes felt as an obstacle by the noble men engaged in this work. We do not want chapels for the poor, supported by the rich. But we wish for and require something better —the free church, where the rich and poor shall meet together, where all shall be on a level, where all the common distinctions of life shall be unknown. Nor do we wish earnest and devoted Christians to provide, beside their own church where they worship, themselves, another to which the unchurched and indifferent shall be invited. But the place where the purest and best and most spiritual meet for the bread of life, is the very place where we ought to invite the poor in spirit, the hungry heart, the half-frozen soul. Let him go with them, to have the best, and to be blessed by the presence of the purest. In the atmosphere of their worship, his heart will be touched. The melodies of their hymns, the tenderness of their prayers, and above all, the love which welcomes him to their feast, will do more to convert his soul to God than any mere eloquence, though it speaks with the tongues of men and of angels. In that loving company "he is convinced of all, he is judged of all, the secrets of his heart are made manifest; and so, falling down on his face, he will worship God, and declare that God is in you of a truth."

Every method which is in accordance with the divine laws possesses many subtle advantages; and other kinds of good arrive which were unsuspected and unforeseen. A free church has a pleasant atmosphere, which makes every one who comes in feel at home. I have frequently had persons say to me, "I attended your church once, Mr. Clarke, when I was in Boston, and somehow it seemed like home." No doubt the same feeling may exist under the pew system, when the

minister and people take pains to cherish a hospitable spirit,—but in a free church it comes of itself. Two hundred pews bought or hired, mean two hundred pieces of private property into which the floor of the church is divided off. This feeling of private property is felt, to some degree, by every man who sits in his own pew, and it necessarily produces an atmosphere of separation, which can only be overcome by an effort. And where the pew-owners succeed in getting rid of this feeling, the strangers who come to the church can hardly help being chilled a little by the fear of intruding into the pew of some one who may not want them. Is it not a good thing to drive all idea of private property out of the church?

Another advantage of the free-seat system is that it dispenses with the body of pew-holders as an organized and controlling influence in the affairs of the congregation. What that influence sometimes is will be seen in the fact that the fate of the Old South Church edifice in Boston, with all its historic and religious bearings, was decided by the votes of a small majority out of forty-two pew-holders. Such corporations commonly are controlled by energetic business men who come to the front and direct its affairs. Such men may be worthy and excellent persons, but they are apt to care more for the outward prosperity than the inward growth of a society; are more interested in having a smart minister who will draw crowds, than a faithful pastor and spiritual guide; more interested in a fine showy church edifice in a fashionable quarter, than in keeping the society out of debt; more interested in having wealthy people come and buy pews, than in having the gospel preached to the poor. In a free church there is no such controlling body of pew-holders, but a single organization united on a religious basis, which controls all the affairs, spiritual and financial, of the society. In the Church of the Disciples, the edifice is held by a body of six or nine trustees, for the use of the church. All the business—spiritual, moral, educational, ritual, financial—is in the hands of those who unite together for the study and practice of Christianity, and are organized for that purpose.

The free-seat system promotes peace and harmony in a congregation. If a member of the society is dissatisfied with the preaching of the minister, or with his fellow-worshippers, he is not obliged to remain because he owns a pew,—he takes his hat and quietly retires, and some one else takes his place who is more at home in the church.

The free-seat system fills the church with worshippers. Its open

doors invite the poor, who cannot afford to buy a pew; strangers in the city; young men and women from the country, with small means and few acquaintances, who, if not shut out, are left out by the common method. On the pew-system, the man of wealth is urged to buy a pew, and consents to the request good naturedly. But he does not agree to sit in the pew after it is bought. If he prefers to stay at home, or go to drive, he cannot be blamed as breaking any promise. Thus our large churches, with ample accommodations, may often be half full, because the church-goers and church-owners happen to be different persons. There is also a certain proportion of persons belonging to every society who are absent from church from sickness, or from being out of town, and if they are pew-owners, their places remain empty. But in a free church, this regular average of absences, which is a constant number, furnishes just so many additional seats, enabling a congregation, of say one thousand persons, to be comfortably accommodated in a hall which only seats eight hundred.

Let us now pass to the difficulties of the free seat system, and to the objections usually urged against it. The first, and most important, is the financial objection. I find, in a recent number of "The Liberal Christian," the following paragraph in relation to the sale of Mr. Hepworth's church in New York:—

"The financial failure of the enterprise is only the latest illustration of what must be recognized as a fact in the history of church building, viz.: that no new enterprise like this, which begins with a large debt and depends for its support upon the voluntary contributions of people in moderate circumstances, ever succeeds financially. It is a discouraging admission for the advocates of the free-church system, but we may as well look the fact in the face."

If we admit the principle here laid down, I do not see how it is "a discouraging admission for the advocates of the free-church system." A church "which begins with a large debt," whether depending on voluntary subscriptions or on the sale or rent of pews, is very apt to be a financial failure. A free-church which should "begin" with a large debt, would, in my opinion, be very sure to fail. But a large debt is no essential part of the free-church system. One advantage, in fact, of the method I advocate is, that a free-church is *not so likely to run in debt*, since there is no body of pew-holders to fall back upon. If the building committee of a free-church runs in debt, they must pay it themselves, or find some individuals to assume the responsibility. But

a building committee, acting for a corporation of pew owners, may run in debt and leave the corporation to pay it. When the Church of the Disciples was formed in Boston, in 1841, there were twelve or more Unitarian societies in the city, all on the pew system, and all having their own church edifices, free from debt, and most of them erected by former generations. Of these twelve, four have been sold, and have disappeared, leaving no trace behind.* Two others have been sold and rebuilt in a different place, with such heavy debts on both that one of them was lost to the society, and the other may be.† Suppose I should attribute these financial failures to the pew system, and say that it is a discouraging admission for the advocates of that plan that out of twelve churches they have lost five or six. It would not be fair to say so, but it would be less unjust than to charge the failure of Mr. Hepworth's church to the voluntary system.‡

Let me admit, however, all that can fairly be objected to the voluntary method. It is, no doubt, more easy and convenient to collect the necessary funds for the support of a church by taxing pews. To send round a tax-bill once a quarter, is a very simple method of meeting expenses. So long as the pews are in demand, this method avoids all difficulty. On the voluntary system, you must either take a good deal of pains to find your subscribers, or else have the contribution box going about every week. It is also sometimes necessary to appeal to the congregation, and remind them that they are expected to give. On the voluntary system, therefore, financial matters obtrude themselves oftener on the attention, and this is by no means agreeable.

And again, there is no doubt but that *more* money can usually be raised for current expenses by the pew-system than by the other. This is the case at present, though I think it partly owing to the voluntary system being new and one to which the community is not accustomed. Many think a free-church means one where they are not expected to contribute anything. Others, who mean to subscribe, forget to do so, because no quarterly tax-bill comes to remind them of

*These were "The New North Church" in Hanover street, the Purchase street (afterward Harrison Avenue) Church, the 12th Congregational, and Mr. Gray's, afterward Mr. Alger's, on Bulfinch street.

†Second Church, Hanover street, the society saved by uniting with the church in Bedford street. Brattle Square Church, loaded with a debt, and a new building unsuited for its purposes.

‡Under the usual plan, the building is the property of the pew-holders, who can mortgage it for a debt, or even sell it and divide the money. One church was lost by mortgages levied to raise money to pay the salary of the minister,—in other cases, the building has been sold, and a part or the whole of the proceeds put into the possession of the pew-holders.

it. Some persons are ashamed to give small sums, and so give nothing. And when the amount each one shall give is left to be decided by himself, instead of being a fixed rent decided for him, he may often give himself the benefit of the doubt, and pay very much less for his seat and that of his family than he would pay for pew-rent in another church. For such reasons, it may happen that a church on the voluntary principle will not be able, at least at first, to raise as much as one on the other plan.

But I think there is reason for believing that the voluntary principle, so advantageous in other ways, will also be found, in the long run, to be the most successful financially. Pew-rents are paid, but often paid grudgingly and with grumbling. But no one can grumble or complain at paying a sum which he fixes for himself. And if God loves a cheerful giver, I think that the minister too would often prefer a smaller salary, given cheerfully, than a larger one paid reluctantly.

And besides, the voluntary system educates the congregation to *the principle* of liberality. They learn to decide according to conscience what to give,—they do not give to satisfy public opinion, for no one else knows the amount of their contribution, except perhaps the Treasurer or Finance Committee. There is no gratification of vanity in being known to pay a large rent in a fashionable church. If, under these conditions, the average contributions increase, we may believe that the people are being educated to liberality.

My own ministry in the Church of the Disciples has lasted through so many years that my experience in this respect may be considered valuable. I have never been promised any regular salary. When the church was formed, I told the people that I would give them my services, and they should give me whatever they were able and willing to do. During the first years of my ministry, my salary was small, the average being about $700 or $800 during the first nine years. During the next nine years the salary stood at about $1200. During the next five years it was $2500. During the next three years it was $4000; and during the last three years it has been $5000. This increase has been partly due to the increase of the congregation; but it is also due to the increase in the average amount of the subscriptions. Ten years ago we had a list of 185 actual subscribers, and the average of each was about $18. The number of subscribers last

year was 288, and the average amount from each contributor was a little over $25. So that while the number of subscribers has risen in ten years from 185 to 288, the average amount paid by each has also risen from $18.00 to $25.00. We may therefore say, I think, that under this plan, not only more persons are learning to give, but that each person is also learning to give more.

The amount collected last year in our church for all purposes was a little more than $11,000. Of this sum $7,560 was subscribed for the current expenses, and $3,600 was contributed for missionary and charitable purposes. The amount given by each person for current expenses varied from $5 to $100, and over,—the average being, as I have before said, about $25 to a contributor. The present church edifice was erected at a cost for land and building of about $70,000; all of which was given outright for the purpose. When finished it was paid for, leaving no debt, and it was found to have cost some $200 less than the original estimate.

It is often said, however, that in the case of this particular church there were exceptional circumstances in the position of the society and myself which enabled us to succeed. If this were so, at first, certainly it has reached a position to-day which makes it independent of any such circumstances. Moreover, other churches in Boston have succeeded equally well in maintaining the voluntary principle, under circumstances wholly different from ours.

Take the case, for instance, of the Episcopal Church in Boston, called "The Church of the Advent." There are no pew-rents in this church. All the seats are free, as they are in ours. But they differ from us by meeting their current expenses, not by an annual subscription, but by a collection every Sunday, called "the Offertory." Last year they received, through this collection, $9913.36. This church began with nothing, and now owns its church-edifice on Bowdoin street, has a fund of $25,000 for parish purposes, and a piece of land worth about $50,000 for a new building, and it is free from debt.

This Church of the Advent is what is called "Ritualistic," and it may be said that their success is owing to the zeal engendered by Ritualism. Let us then look at the case of the only other free church in Boston which I know of,—that worshipping in "The Tremont Temple." This is a Baptist Church, the very opposite of Ritualistic, and its present pastor, Dr. Lorimer, is not even a special friend of the

voluntary principle. But he testified, (in the Old South Church case,) that he preaches to a congregation of some two thousand persons, that he has a church of thirteen hundred communicants, that the funds are raised by voluntary contributions and semi-annual subscriptions, that there are no pews or pew-rents, and that the income of the church for current expenses, all raised by voluntary contribution, is about nineteen or twenty thousand dollars. If it is said that this success is owing to the central situation of the Tremont Temple, I reply that the Old South Church, a church always carried on by pew-rent, and within a stone's throw of the Tremont Temple, has been abandoned on the ground that a congregation could not be retained there. If it is said that Dr. Lorimer is a very popular preacher, I answer that when he preached in the Shawmut Avenue Church, (which he testifies to be an equally good situation,) he had no such congregation as this,—and there have been half a dozen other ministers in the Tremont Temple, within my memory, under all of whom the society has been successful. It is not as *easy*, as I have admitted, to collect a large income from free seats as from pews, but the case of the Tremont Temple shows that with proper organization and effort it can be done. In many free churches the envelope system has been found to do well; but as that was so ably described in a former paper at this convention, I need say nothing more about it here.

A common objection to free seats, is, that families cannot sit together. We have not found this a serious difficulty. Families who arrive a little before the service begins, have no trouble in sitting together.

Another objection is, that with free seats, there will be only an audience, not a church. I see no weight in this. In my own society there is a great deal of church life, social activity, and religious cooperation. The church-rooms are open every day in the week, from morning till late at night, and there is always some work going on in them. Our congregation is not held together by preaching, so much as by church action. I am glad to believe that the Church of the Disciples does not depend on its minister, but has a life of its own. If it were otherwise, I should consider my work a failure.

I do not claim that the voluntary method is the only Christian plan, or that our church is better than others. Remembering the amount and variety of Christian work done by such churches as those of Brother Ellis and Brother Hale, and others that I could name, we certainly

can pretend to no superior excellence for ours. But I contend that the principle has advantages which may be thus summed up: It enables the church to preach its gospel to every creature; it invites the poor to meet with the rich for the public worship of God; it accords with the doctrine of the equality of all souls before their maker, abolishing all invidious distinctions in the Lord's house; it thus makes the atmosphere of the church more loving, friendly, homelike; it removes the notion of buying and selling, and the rights of property from the sanctuary; it prevents mere wealth from assuming too much control in church affairs; it fills the church with worshippers; it prevents disputes among them; and if it does not always produce such facility in collecting large sums, it depends financially on many small contributions, rather than on a few larger ones,—thus giving a more solid financial basis to the church.

Let me add, in conclusion, that to me, personally, this method has been always growing more dear,—that I owe to it much comfort and satisfaction. I count it among the privileges of my life that I have been enabled during so many years to minister to a society thus organized, and that I have been permitted to see it steadily increasing in strength, and I hope also in usefulness. In carrying on this church I have had the assistance of a body of devoted men and women whose aid has been invaluable, and many of whom have been attracted to it by its open doors and free seats. And the same attraction has brought to our society a large number of young persons, who are growing up with us and working with us; and on whom we depend to take our places, when our work is done.

I trust the members of the Convention will excuse any appearance of egotism in this paper, as I have been obliged, from the very nature of the case, to talk more of my own work than I could have wished.